



Life & Arts

FTWeekend

Mary Quant Simon Schama on the designer who made the Sixties swing — PAGE 4

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Ian Buruma at his home in New York, photographed for the FT by Martine Fougeron; protesters at the Ghomeshi trial in Toronto, below — Reuters

contentious subject-matter; the job is to make people think. There is much talk on American campuses of the need to avoid opinions, or even literary works that might make students feel uncomfortable. But a certain degree of discomfort can help people consider unfamiliar or unorthodox points of view, which is usually salutary.

In fact, the NYRB, never a magazine to follow any particular movement, had published writers who behaved violently before. Norman Mailer had stabbed his wife with a knife. A murderer named Jack Abbott, promoted by Mailer, published his writing in the magazine while still in prison in the 1980s and killed a man almost as soon as he got out. This caused a considerable scandal, particularly as Mailer had lobbied for his release. Some people saw it as the consequence of naive liberal tolerance, and others regarded the admiration for Abbott as a form of literary machismo. But even then, no editor was fired as a result. One might say, of

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course, that times have changed. One could also say that Mailer, and possibly Abbott, were better writers than Ghomeshi. I would not claim that Ghomeshi is a master stylist. But the quality of a person's prose should not determine how we judge the writer's moral character. And moral character, in turn, shouldn't be the sole determinant in whether the person should or should not be published.

Considering people who have fallen from grace — again, often for very good reasons — it is hard to avoid using religious language. The way out of moral ignominy is to be redeemed. But redemption has to be earned by confession, self-reflection and apology. This is why people caught in a history of sexual misbehaviour usually issue an apology straight away, sometimes a rather slippery one: "If I have offended anyone . . ." etc. I was only an offender by proxy, as it were. Nonetheless, I was

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Where to draw the line?

When Ian Buruma published an article in the New York Review of Books by a man accused of sexual assault, the outcry that followed cost him his job. Here he reflects on what went wrong and the challenges of editing in an age of outrage

Until recently Jian Ghomeshi, a former CBC broadcaster and rock musician, was not much known outside Canada. I now rather wish it had stayed that way. But last September I decided, as editor of the New York Review of Books, to publish Ghomeshi's story of his life after he was tried in 2016 on four counts of sexual assault and one count of overcoming resistance by choking. He said that the three women involved had taken part in sadomasochistic acts willingly. They said otherwise, and more than 20 other women made similar allegations. In court Ghomeshi was acquitted on all counts for lack of sufficient evidence. Months later he issued a public apology to a former colleague in return for the withdrawal of a separate charge of sexual assault, and signed a "peace bond", pledging to behave himself.

Instead of going to prison, Ghomeshi was punished by being purged from public life. He lost his job, of course, but also became a vilified figure in social media. Perhaps he richly deserved this. Sexual abuse is notoriously hard to prove in court. Public disgrace may well be his just deserts. But since a similar fate has developed an increasing number of men, after being exposed for a variety of sexual offences, some more and some less serious than those of which Ghomeshi was accused, I thought that this experience needed to be better understood. It raised questions about how people ought to be penalised. Due

process is important, after all. A prison sentence has limits. Public disgrace is open-ended.

I was also intrigued by the story of a man who had everything, and then lost it all. Ghomeshi was a huge media star in Canada. Now, as far as the public is concerned, he only exists as an online villain. So I published his personal account as part of a package about fallen men, which included a piece on Jim Brown, the black American football star, who was once revered as a civil rights activist and one of the greatest athletes of his time, but was recently exposed as a man who behaved violently towards several women.

I knew this was provocative and expected to be criticised, but nonetheless

less the ferocity of the reaction surprised me. We were accused of promoting a rapist. My own journalistic writings, going back decades, were scrutinised for proof that I was a misogynist. Online petitions were circulated to get me fired from my job. University presses threatened to pull their ads. I also did a clumsy interview over the phone with Slate, in which I said of Ghomeshi: "The exact nature of his behaviour — how much consent was involved — I have no idea, nor is it really my concern." By this, I meant that I was mainly concerned with what happened later, but it was read as though I had no concern for what had happened to the women, stoking the fires even higher. As a result, the magazine's owner decided I had to go.

Some of the criticism of Ghomeshi's piece made sense. I should have insisted that the accusations against him were spelt out in more detail. He omitted the fact that he had caused injury, with reports of one woman suffering a cracked rib, and didn't mention the large number of women who had accused him. I could also have made it clear that our intention had not been to exonerate him, let alone to excuse violence against women — I took this for granted, as did two other editors who worked closely on the piece. I shouldn't have. The voices of his accusers ought to have been considered, as a response to his evasions. Ghomeshi's fudging made him less convincing as a vehicle for discussing questions of crime and punishment.

Despite these editorial errors, and an ill-considered interview, amplified in social media, I still believe that his story was an important contribution to a discussion worth having. For some of my critics, however, the actual content of the piece was not the main issue. Before the piece was even published, the news was leaked from the office to a sympathetic blogger, and the Twitter storm, mostly from Canada, blew like a hurricane. The critics' point was that a figure like Ghomeshi had no right to write his personal account in a prestigious liberal journal. A great modern taboo had been broken. The transgression was not that any particular view was defended, but that a person accused of sexual abuses should be heard at all. This was not even a matter for debate. I was reminded by a member of the editorial staff that #MeToo was a movement, and by publishing the piece we were way out of line. We didn't need nuance, I was told; nuance was considered to be a form of complicity.

I disagreed with some members of my staff, who had argued against running the piece. In my view, an editor should not be afraid of publishing



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